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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine the task-related help-seeking behavior of 85 third- and fifth-grade boys and girls of varying scholastic ability. Participants, white middle-class children, were blocked into high- and low-ability groups on the basis of word comprehension subscores on the California Achievement Test. Children were presented with 16 words whose meanings had to be identified by selecting from a list of alternatives the word most closely matching the target word in meaning. Children were given the opportunity to seek help as desired, and their bids for help were classified as being either necessary or unnecessary. Children's preference for indirect versus direct help was also assessed. Results of the study indicated that, with increased age, children seek more necessary help than unnecessary help and clearly prefer mastery-oriented help to dependency-oriented help, especially at low ability levels. Implications of the findings for understanding individual differences in the adaptive use of help seeking in achievement situations were drawn. (Author/RH)

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Necessary and unnecessary help-seeking in children

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Abstract

The present study examined the task-related help-seeking behavior of 85 third and fifth grade boys and girls of varying ability. Children were given the opportunity to seek help as desired, and their bids for help were classified objectively as necessary, or unnecessary. Their preference for indirect versus direct help was also assessed. Results of the study indicated that with increased age, children seek more necessary help than unnecessary help, and clearly prefer mastery-oriented help to dependency-oriented help. Girls, more than boys, were found to prefer mastery-oriented help especially at low ability levels. Implications of the findings for understanding individual differences in the adaptive use of help-seeking in achievement situations are discussed.

Necessary and Unnecessary help-seeking in children

One of the most important skills children can develop to cope with learning situations is the ability to obtain help from adults and peers when it is needed (Anderson & Messick, 1974; Murphy, 1962; Murphy & Moriarty, 1976). The extent to which children are successful in utilizing others as resources reflects children's ability to detect and communicate their needs as well as the responsiveness of the social environment to the expression of these needs. Children's appropriate and effective use of others as problem-solving and learning resources, however, has received little attention from researchers.

Previous empirical examinations of children's orientations to seeking and utilizing help from others have typically viewed help-seeking behaviors as dependency behaviors (e.g., Fischer & Torney, 1976; Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957; Sears, Rau, & Alpert, 1965), and as such, at odds with the development of achievement and independence (e.g., Winterbottom, 1958). Bandura & Walters (1963, p. 139) defined dependency as "a class of responses that are capable of eliciting positive attending and ministering responses from others." Yet, many of the behaviors that elicit approval, attention, information, and help could easily be seen as achievement-oriented behaviors, and thus as part of a complex of independence behaviors. Although the relationship of dependence to independence and achievement has been of longstanding interest to developmental researchers (e.g., Belier, 1955; Heathers, 1955), the concepts of dependency, independence, and achievement have not always been defined unambiguously (Parke, 1969). Thus, semantic problems arise when these terms are used to label behaviors.

The relationship between help-seeking, independence, achievement, and problem-solving can be understood within the framework of Vygotsky's formulations of learning as an activity that is, at least initially, social (Brown, 1982; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1979). Knowledge and understanding have their roots in social interactions with more mature problem-solvers who plan, direct, monitor, and evaluate the child's task activity. Mental functions develop on an "interpsychological," or social, level as children interact with adults who serve as supportive, knowledgeable others. Parents (e.g., Wertsch, 1979; Wertsch, McNamee, McLane, & Budwig, 1980) teachers (e.g., Feuerstein, 1980), and peers (e.g., Griffin & Cole, 1984) may serve as supportive others. After interacting with others in learning situations, children gradually internalize the supportive other role and begin to perform these regulatory behaviors for themselves. Instrumental help-seeking, then, may be thought of as a precursor of self-regulation that serves as a mechanism of transition from other-regulation in problem-solving to problem-solving on the "intrapsychological" or individual plane.

It has been suggested (Murphy, 1962; Nelson-Le Gall, 1981) that children's help-seeking might be further differentiated based on the various functions it may serve. The child's goal in seeking help may be merely to complete a task without comprehension or mastery as an objective, to avoid criticism from an agent of evaluation, or to avoid the task altogether. Help-seeking may, however, serve a far more constructive purpose, such as enhancing the child's own competence. Thus it is important to consider the appropriateness of help-seeking for a person having an assumed or known level of capacity for coping with

the difficulty encountered. Help-seeking behavior from a child whose goals can be obtained readily and economically without the mediation of others should thus be judged differently than such behavior from a child whose goals could not be achieved without help. In other words, the necessity of seeking help for goal-attainment in the task setting should be considered in characterizing help-seeking as constructive for mastery or not.

A useful distinction has been proposed between "executive" or dependency-oriented help-seeking and "instrumental" or mastery-oriented help-seeking was proposed (Nelson-Le Gall, 1981). Executive help-seeking refers to those instances in which the child's intention is to have someone else solve a problem or attain a goal on his or her behalf. Children seeking executive help with problems beyond their current level of competence appear to be more interested in the product of successful outcome rather than the process of achieving the outcome. Thus, direct help and ready-made solutions would b of interest to those seeking executive help. Some problems encountered by children undoubtedly call for executive help-seeking, but continued reliance on others to provide more help than is needed would be detrimental to the development of independent mastery and may even induce dependency. Instrumental help-seeking is mastery oriented and refers to those instances in which the help requested appears to be focused on acquiring successful processes of problem solution and is limited to the amount and type needed to allow children to solve problems or attain goals for themselves. Accordingly, indirect help, clues and hints would be of interest to those seeking instrumental help. Children with effective

instrumental help-seeking skills are able to refuse help when they can perform a task by themselves, yet, can obtain help when it is needed. Such help-seeking represents competent, problem-solving behavior.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the forms and functions of help-seeking in children in a problem-solving situation. A major focus of the study was the degree to which children engaged in necessary help-seeking versus or unnecessary help-seeking. Determination of the necessity of help-seeking was based on assessment of the help-seeker's capability of arriving at a successful solution to the problem unaided (c.f. Cotler, Quilty, & Palmer, 1970). Furthermore, in considering the constructiveness of help-seeking as an adaptive response, an attempt was made to differentiate forms of help-seeking that leave more of the responsibility for final solution to the help-seeker from those forms in which the helper solves the problem for the help-seeker. Therefore, the form of help available to the child was also varied. This study employed a procedure designed to provide a direct and objective measure of necessary versus unnecessary help-seeking (c.f. Cotler, Quilty & Palmer, 1970).

Based upon findings from previous studies (e.g., Fischer & Torney, 1976; Mischel, 1970) it was expected that girls would seek more help than would boys, especially more unnecessary help. Also, because the objective need for help was expected to vary with the current level of competence at the task, two groups of different ability levels were compared. Accordingly, the high ability group was expected to seek less necessary help than the low ability group. Finally, grade level was varied to provide groups of children varying in age and academic

experience since these child characteristic have been reported to influence help-seeking behavior (e.g., Nelson-Le Gall & Gumerman, 1984). Piaget (1976) described young children as being more concerned with outcomes than with the processes of achieving outcomes. Because this preference has been noted by other researchers in various aspects of young children's performance at cognitive tasks (e.g., Brown, 1976), age was expected to influence the preference for instrumental versus executive help independently from the effect of ability. Specifically, preference for executive help in the form of answers was expected to decrease over age.

Method

Subjects

Eighty-five third and fifth grade children (56 boys and 47 girls) participated in this study. All children were white and were from middle-class backgrounds. The children attended local elementary schools. Children were blocked into high (more than one full year above grade level), and low (more than one year below grade level) ability groups based on the word comprehension subscores on the California Achievement Test in their school records. The sample, then, consisted of 18 low ability boys, 15 low ability girls, 29 high ability boys, and 23 high ability girls. Written parental consent was obtained for each child participating in the study.

Materials

Test items from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (levels 9-12) were pretested on a separate sample fifth-grade boys and girls who attended one of the same schools as children participating in the study. With consultation from an educational researcher with expertise in the area of vocabulary skills, pretest words were chosen based upon their frequency of occurrence in readers and literature intended for the grade levels of the subjects. The words were chosen to be of moderate difficulty. The final group of test words consisted of thirty-two vocabulary items. Sixteen separate words were selected for each grade level.

Procedure

Individual children were escorted from their classrooms by the experimenter to a quiet room in the school building. Children were seated at a table and received instructions for playing the "quiz" game. In this game the children were presented with 16 words whose meanings had to be identified by selecting from a list of alternatives that word which most closely matched the target word in meaning. Each target word and the list of alternatives were presented on a separate sheet of paper.

Children were told they would be allowed two chances to answer each word. They were instructed to write down a tentative answer to each question and then to set this tentative slip aside. After each item children had the options of giving the tentative answer to the experimenter as the final answer, or asking for help with the item and then accepting or rejecting that help and still providing a final answer to the experimenter. As part of the orientation to the game, the

children were told that the experimenter could not help, but that another child who played the game earlier had agreed to leave his/her own answers and also some hints to the answers. Children were told that they could see these answers or hints if they wanted help. The "helper" child was referred to as a boy for male subjects and as a girl for female subjects. The availability of help in the form of answers and in the form of hints (i.e., word used in a sentence) permitted the assessment of differential preference for executive versus instrumental help.

The children were asked to record their final answer on a second answer slip and place it in an "answer box," with other children's answers. Since the children were told that it was only the final answer in which the experimenter was interested, the answer box was used to convey a sense of anonymity concerning possible differences between the children's tentative and final answers. The answer box, however, contained only blank answer slips. This permitted the comparison of their tentative answers with their final answers. The experimenter also recorded the children's final answer. Children were then debriefed, praised for their cooperation and returned to their classrooms.

Results

Necessary Versus Unnecessary Help-seeking

In order to examine the appropriateness of help-seeking, four types of responses were analyzed: (a) correct answers provided without help; (b) incorrect answers provided without help; (c) appropriate or necessary help-seeking, in which children made an incorrect tentative answer and requested help before giving a final answer to the

experimenter; and (d) inappropriate or unnecessary help-seeking in which children had a correct tentative answer but help was requested anyway before providing the final answer.

Children's responses to the task were analyzed in a 2 (grade) x 2 (gender) x 2 (ability) x 4 (response) analysis of variance with the four response types as a within-subject factor. The only significant main effect was the type of response, $F(3,231) = 28.84$, $p < .0001$, estimated $w^2 = .496$. Children asked help ($m = 4.99$) more often than not ($m = 3.02$), and made significantly fewer independent wrong responses than any other type of response. This effect, however, is qualified by the predicted significant grade x response, $F(3,231) = 3.48$, $p < .05$, estimated $w^2 = .08$; and ability x response, $F(3,231) = 13.14$, $p < .0001$, estimated $w^2 = .30$, interactions shown in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. T-tests on the mean difference by rate for each of the response categories were significant in each case. Fifth graders sought more necessary help and had more independent correct responses than did third graders. In contrast, third graders sought more unnecessary help and had more independent wrong answers than did the fifth graders. Examination of the t-tests on ability differences showed that low ability children had significantly fewer independent correct responses than did the high ability children, but, as expected, also engaged in more necessary help-seeking than their high ability counterparts.

Insert Table 1 and Table 2 about here

Instrumental Versus Executive Help

A second focus of the present study was to examine the form of help children preferred. In this study, hints represented instrumental help and answers represented executive help. A 2 (grade) x 2 (sex) x 2 (ability) x 2 (form of help) analysis of variance with the last factor within subjects was performed on the number of times children requested help in the form of answers or hints. Degrees of freedom for all effects in this analysis are 1 and 77.

Overall, low ability children requested more help (M = 5.97) than did high ability children (M = 4.37), F = 13.42, $p < .0005$, estimated w^2 = .127. In addition, children requested help more frequently in the form of hints (M = 6.02) than in the form of answers (M = 3.96), F = 5.74, $p < .02$, estimated w^2 = .053. These findings were, however, qualified by significant two-way and three-way interactions. The significant grade x form of help interaction (F = 16.86, $p < .0001$) was due to the increased preference for hints (M =6.81) over answers (M = 2.77) among fifth graders; in comparison, third graders asked for answers (M = 5.45) equally as often as for hints (M = 5.05). The significant gender x form of help interactions (F = 6.58, $p < .02$) is superceded by the significant gender x ability x form of help interaction (F = 4.59, $p < .05$) that was found (see Table 3).

Analysis of the simple interaction effects of the gender x ability x form of help interaction, indicated that gender and form of help interacted only at the low ability level, $F(1,81)$ = 4.70, $p < .05$. Low ability boys asked for hints only slightly less often than they asked for answers. In contrast, low ability girls asked for hints

significantly more often than they asked for answers.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

The findings of the present study demonstrate that children engage in both necessary and unnecessary help-seeking. Children were also demonstrated to prefer instrumental help to executive help. Interesting grade differences occurred for measures of the appropriateness of help-seeking, and for preferences for instrumental versus executive help. Fifth graders' help-seeking was appropriate more often than was the help-seeking of the third grade group. Fifth graders sought more necessary help and thus had fewer independent wrong answers than did third graders. The net result of this behavior was fewer wrong final answers on the task. Furthermore, because fifth graders showed a stronger preference for instrumental help (i.e., hints) than did third graders, their help-seeking may be seen not only as more appropriate, but also as more conducive to learning.

This age-related increase in the adaptive use of help-seeking as a problem-solving strategy is suggested also by data on children's tentative answers. It should be noted that third and fifth graders had approximately equal numbers of correct tentative responses (disregarding whether or not help was subsequently sought). These findings suggest that younger children are having difficulty assessing the need for help. One possible explanation for this age difference lies in differential

metacognitive skills. The younger children may be less likely to make a complete or at least an accurate survey of what they know and do not know before taking advantage of the available help. Also, the younger children may simply be less experienced with making evaluations of their own performance in academic-like settings and therefore may be reluctant to rely on their own impressions of their performance.

Ability level, as expected, influenced the degree of help sought. Low ability children made fewer correct tentative responses than did high ability children. Low ability children also sought more help than high ability children, but, most importantly, this was due to increased requests for necessary help. Children did not differ by ability in the amount of unnecessary help requested. Furthermore, low ability children, especially girls, showed a preference for instrumental help over executive help. Taken together these findings suggest the potential for adaptive use of help-seeking among children low in skill level.

Sex differences, which are often reported in studies of help-seeking, were infrequent in the present study. Parents, teachers, and other significant adult socialization agents have been reported to reinforce help-seeking behaviors by girls more so than by boys (e.g. Rothbart & Rothbart, 1976). Thus, boys may come to view help-seeking as more inappropriate to roles than girls and consequently seek less help than do girls (e.g., DePaulo & Fisher, 1980). Fischer and Torney (1976) demonstrated the tendency for children to model help-seeking behavior consistent with their sex role norms. They expected that insofar as children in their sample had adopted sex role norms, help-seeking would

be seen as a more appropriate behavior for girls than for boys, and indeed, girls did seek help earlier than did boys.

There was only one significant sex difference in help-seeking behavior found in our sample: girls more than boys tended to prefer instrumental help to executive help. It is encouraging to note, then, that girls preference for instrumental help may moderate the potentially negative consequences of their openness to seeking help. On the one hand, girls may be at risk for lower achievement ostensibly because of their increased help-seeking. However, because girls prefer instrumental help, they may benefit from the constructive use of others as resources and their achievement may not suffer. On the other hand, girls may be overly reliant on others, and lacking in self esteem. It is important to note also that there were no sex differences in the objectively assessed necessity of children's help-seeking. In this regard, as expected, ability was a more important determinant than gender.

The findings of the present research suggest that help-seeking is included in the set of potential problem-solving strategies children employ to cope with difficulty experienced in task settings. We still know little about which children are likely to seek help, why they seek help, and when and under what circumstances they are most likely to seek needed help. Continued and systematic study of these and related questions are important for the effective structuring of both formal and informal learning environments.

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Table 1

Mean Number of Responses per Category by Grade Level

Response	Grade Level 3	5	T value
Correct-no help	4.21	5.53	9.77***
Incorrect-no help	1.34	.90	7.11**
Necessary help-seeking	4.40	4.72	-3.20**
Unnecessary help-seeking	6.11	4.85	11.25***

**p .01

***p .001

Table 2

Mean Number of Responses per Category by Ability level

Response	Low	High	T value
Correct-no help	2.91	6.23	-26.77***
Incorrect-no help	1.15	1.06	1.48 n.s.
Necessary help-seeking	6.48	3.36	35.86***
Unnecessary help-seeking	5.46	5.38	.670 n.s.

***p .001

Table 3

Mean Number of Answers and Hints Requested by Gender and Ability Level

	Ability Level			
	low		high	
	boys	girls	boys	girls
Form of Help				
Answer	6.17	4.40	2.66	3.61
Hint	5.22	8.20	4.97	6.57